

Review Article

Letter to editor: its importance and drawbacks

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ABSTRACT

Letter to editors are one of the types of manuscript which is published in a journal. It is important to know how they help in the field of research. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the importance and drawbacks of letters to editor. This study was conducted by searching different websites such as Medline, PubMed and Google Scholar. The literature shows that letter to editor serve as a control measure for researchers. Whereas it can also be used to damage a reputation of a researcher.

Keywords: Letter to editor, Importance and drawbacks

INTRODUCTION

A letter to the editor is a means of short communication between the author of an article and the reader of a journal.¹

Articles published in a journal are reviewed and screened meticulously, some errors may have been overlooked by the editorial board before publication of the article in the journal. In these conditions readers can send a letter to the editor expressing their comments about the article. These letters are not a research articles but short and brief review of a paper and provide enough insight, offer suggestions, alternative ways of doing things, clears the concept, points things which may have been missed by the author or the reviewer.² International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommends publication of these letters in journals together with their answers. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors has declared that all biomedical journals should have such a section because the absence of one "denies readers the possibility of responding to articles in the same journal that published the original work."¹⁻³ A letter must have a reason, and it should convey its message in a short and brief fashion. These letters are usually sent for publication.⁴

Letters to editor reviews unfavourably aspects of a paper, letters are a control mechanism that facilitates progress after an article has been published.⁴ They warrant free expression of judgement, reveal the cognitive and analytical robustness of the community concerned, and help shape knowledge.² Letter becomes more easily available to readers when the message is short and brief, with clearly defined points.

METHODS

In the present study, an intensive literature search was done in different websites such as Medline, PubMed and Scopus and antecedently published articles on letter to editor were studied in detail and we took into consideration those studies in which letter to editors with their advantages and impact of its criticism.

RESULTS

Importance of letters

Since they are evidence based they help raise points which have not been covered in the previous study. Additional information is given so as to support the

work.⁵ When these letters serve the purpose to criticize a particularly published paper, then one should be short and only evidence based criticism should be made using references from a previously published work to justify one's criticism.^{5,6}

The aim of a letter written in response to a published study should either be to support or criticize the methods, results, analysis or outcome of the study. Similarly, the letter to the editor has a dual role in the literature. It can serve as a corrective tool and also to spread and share knowledge and experience.

They help serve after-publication evaluation.⁶ They help finding errors missed during the review before publication. This helps in maintaining journals' high quality. Creative awareness to important new/useful information which are relevant to clinical practice, general comments on matters of public interest to the readers are other pros of having letter-to-editor. It provides second/ substitute viewpoint or experience to a study.⁵

Drawbacks

Letter to editor can have several misuses in the hands of those who falsely lend support in favour or criticisms of an opponent. Letter to the Editor is treated as one of the kinds/types of manuscript, and submission is via the same channels as other article. For example, journals with online submission of article, authors who submit letters have to register themselves, log in and track their manuscripts, and later submit revisions online. Some journal charges some amount of money, while some are free for submission and for review process. This sometimes may become hindrance to some from commenting their valuable viewpoints or experiences. Also for comments made about previously published research study, many journals would only entertain letters sent within a prescribed time period, this time period may range from three weeks to three months, after the paper's publication.

Moreover, Indexing needs to be improved as valuable comment may not endure and the original manuscript's message may live on.⁵

Other drawbacks of letter to editor are comments that are not directly related to a published article, repetition of points already covered in the original article, general comments (that lack focus), message or reason for letter is unclear, too much description and detail, excessive text, no new or useful information, too many tables and/or figures, too many references, use of offensive, abusive or libellous language, biased opinion, comments on the integrity, competence or sincerity of other authors.⁶

DISCUSSION

Research in publication are prone to errors, statistic misuse, selective citation of published work, misquotation of references, often done unknowingly which can escape peer review before the paper is published. Only after publication is the paper more open for critical review where it is assigned its place.

Most of the times these remain undervalued or underdeveloped by clinicians, researchers and journals. Reasons for underdevelopment of letters as compared to original research in assessing the academic performance is the latter carries more weight-age. The challenges that follows to prepare a concise critical analysis needs to be awarded and also recognised. Also inadequate linkage to the original research makes it difficult to cite and summarise and the impact as such of the original paper remains whereas valuable insights, suggestions and comments in the letters are lost. Online journals have come up with electronic means of linkage to the research while the traditional journals do not have such mechanisms. But letters to editor are not the surest means of neutralising the effect of any misleading or fraudulent articles or research. Letters to editors may help in removing the effect in the minds of the researcher as well as in other readers who retrieve these papers.⁷

On the other hand, it is well known that such publications are accepted easier than regular ones and may be a gateway for authors without outstanding scientific merits to input their names in high impact factor journals.⁸

More than half of all criticism made in correspondence went unanswered by authors.⁹ Even though these comments could have led to something important, ignoring them leaves a gap in the knowledge of research or in clinical fields.

A contrary view is that published correspondence is part of the continual process of peer review.⁹ Which was missed before the publication of the article.

Despite the peer-review process, which has largely failed, letters to the editor are likely to remain the mainstay of holding authors accountable for their work. Therefore, this makes it important to respond to letters-to-editor.

One must raise the recognition received by these letters as a sincere and quality criticism, positive ways to help in future research as the author or reader may have a better insight of doing research based on some experience or expertise of those who have some quality comments.

The letters to the editor published in journals carry a great deal of peer review, but these corrections and amplifications appear in print weeks or months after the original article and remain permanently separated by a thick pile of pages, even if indexing services do their best to cross reference.¹⁰

Scientific discourse occurs in many forms: among colleagues, at scientific meetings, during peer review, and after publication. Such discourse is essential in interpreting studies and guiding future research.¹¹

Only 1 form of discourse—letters—becomes part of the permanent biomedical record, linked with the scientific article through its citation in databases such as MEDLINE. Letter to editor facilitate and documents debates.¹¹

There are two types of letters to the editor: the observation and the comment. The former presents original work, while the latter constitutes criticism on work already published in the same journal. The first is similar to an original research publication, it's a concise paper but does not follow the formats of it. This may facilitate faster publication.¹² whereas the latter the comment is accepted within a short period of time from 3-6 months depending on the journals guidelines on original research articles published in the journal. The reader may agree or disagree to results or interpretations offered and hence, in order to support their argument, they usually use references of other published research work by colleagues. Letter to editor ensures accountability of authors and editors.⁹ Submitting a letter under a false name to shill in support or to criticize an opponent can have significant consequences.⁴ Be courteous and objective.⁶ Make comments that are specific and succinct.⁶

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